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## NEORATIONAL MADNESS: REZA NEGARESTANI AND THE NEW SOCIETY OF MIND

ALL, PHILOFICTION GEIST, HEGEL, MACHINES, POSTHUMAN, RATIONALITY

*"This book argues, from a functionalist perspective, that mind is only what it does; and that what it does is first and foremost realized by the sociality of agents, which itself is primarily and ontologically constituted by the semantic space of a public language. What mind does is to structure the universe to which it belongs, and structure is the very register of intelligibility as pertaining to the world and intelligence. Only in virtue of the multilayered semantic structure of language does sociality become a normative space of recognitive-cognitive rational agents;*

*and the supposedly 'private' experiences and thoughts of participating agents are only structured as experiences and thoughts in so far as they are bound up in this normative—at once intersubjective and objective—space."*

*—Reza Negarestani, Intelligence and Spirit*

Every time I read this opening paragraph to Reza's critique of the posthuman thought of our day I ask myself: "Where is affect? Where is the human? Where is the body and flesh of life?" This is pure abstraction, a world of Mind divorced from any physical and emotional context. A world of rationalist and discursive reason based on post-analytical Brandomian normativity. A world where machinic intelligence would be at home. A non-empathetic psychopathic world without affects or any sense of empathy, a world of pure reason where the subject vanishes into the machinic multi-agent dynamics of linguistic semantics. The human disappears in an abstraction of neorationalist objectivity. For me, at least, this is the beginning of horror... or, am I reading it wrong, is he saying something else? Let us investigate.

No conception of chance, only the strict control mechanisms of abstract reasoning bound to a rule-set of structured semantics. How would anything new arise from this? Would this be a world of total death? A world without affective relations, only the fully phenomenal registries of reason and intellect bound to a fully qualified realm of control. Even the use above of the "supposedly 'private' experiences and thoughts of participating agents are only structured as experiences and thoughts in so far as they are bound up in this normative—at once intersubjective and objective—space" – as if the notion of 'private' experience were a misnomer, a folk-psychological notion to be disparaged and anathematized. No we will not have 'private' experience in this new world of abstraction. No, this is to be according to Reza the 'inhuman' world of the future. An absolute collectivity of multi-agent machinic being. No more the messiness of those pesky irrational humans to ruin our perfect utopia of neorationism. Maybe I'm insane, but this looks like a world I would rather not live in. I think – if I remember correctly Aldous Huxley stated: "A totally rational world would be a world totally blind and insane." If he didn't say it, then I'm saying it now.

As he'll put it in the paragraph that follows this one: "Indeed, Hegel was the first to describe the community of rational agents as a social model of mind, and to do so in terms of its function. The functional picture of *geist* is essentially a picture of a necessarily deprivatized mind predicated on sociality as its formal condition of possibility." The very notion of a 'deprivatized' mind of a society based on 'rational agents' precludes humans as they are now from such a society. So, is this a society constructed for a future machinic world of artificial intelligence? Agents of some vast virtual society where every aspect of its world is ruled by specialized and rational semiosis? It appears that's what he's seeking. Listen to the precision of his statement: "Perception is only perception because it is apperception, and apperception is only apperceptive in that it is an artefact of a deprivatized semantic space within which recognitive-cognitive agents emerge as by-products of a deeply impersonal space which they themselves have formally conditioned." (10)

How is it possible that these 'agents' can emerge from this 'deeply impersonal space' and at the same time do this because they themselves pre-existed and 'formally conditioned' the very

space of their emergence? He tells us that there is a dialectical twisting and twining between a specific 'semantic structure' and his notion of a 'deprivatized sociality' that enables such a mind to "posit itself as an irreducible 'unifying point or configuring factor'. (10) No sense of physical presence, no humans involved, none of the messiness of the irrational dispositions we've all come to know. No. This is a society of mind, a world of impersonal and non-affective relations where any sense of the private/public structures of our present sociality are a thing of the past. No this is about consciousness divorced from its substructures in flesh and blood human realities where all those irrational drives and impulses can be eliminated allowing a society of rational agents of mind whose "consciousness of itself and consciousness of the universe" can exist presumably in some new vehicle or artefactual world freed of the messiness of life.

Ultimately this society of mind "is endowed with a history rather than a mere nature or past. It becomes an artefact or object of its own conception." (11) Becoming an abstract rational agent in a realm of abstract relations this new entity is free of all those bodily concerns that would reduce it back into its "nature or past" relations with the messiness of life. Because of this adaptation to the impersonal world of rational and deprivatized space this new creature has a history where "there is the possibility of abolishing what is given in history or purports to be its consummate totality." (11) In other words, we can eliminate and erase the human for this new inhuman rational and impersonal world of absolute rationality. Ah, the future, what a wonderful place to visit, but would you want to live there in this realm of rational agents? As he puts it,

*"...mind is ultimately understood as the dimension of structure, or a configuring factor; something which can only be approached via an essentially deprivatized account of discursive (linguistic) apperceptive intelligence. The nature of this investigation and reconstruction originates as much from the viewpoint of contemporary philosophy as from that of the cognitive sciences—specifically, the programme of artificial general intelligence (AGI) or human-level AI, and contemporary philosophy of language as an intersection between linguistics, logic, and computer science." (12)*

He continues pointedly describing the book as "a rudimentary attempt to undertake the urgent task of presenting a philosophy of intelligence in which the questions of what intelligence is, what it can become, and what it does can be formulated. In the context of a philosophy of intelligence, this book also attends to the crucial question of what it means for us—humans—to remain faithful to what we are, to remain intelligible at least to ourselves here and now, and in doing so, to become part of the veritable history of intelligence." (12) In this sense his work is more of an experiment, a toy, something to play around with various ideas, concepts, and notions emerging from both contemporary sciences and philosophy that might contribute to this 'philosophy of intelligence'.

In the first chapter of the book, he offers a succinct and compressed rendering of his rudimentary attempt at presenting a 'philosophy of intelligence'. He will offer in this chapter an "outline of a functionalist and deprivatized account of mind". (12) In chapter two he will offer an *as-if* thought experiment on how to construct an artificial general intelligence as a way of viewing ourselves from the *outside*: "this is an objective labour, so to speak, whereby AGI or

computers tell us what we are in virtue of what we are determinately not—i.e., contra negative theology or the uncritical and merely experiential impressions of ourselves.” (13) Chapter three will move into the Kantian exploration of the “conditions necessary for the possibility of having mind.” (13) In chapter four he will discuss the temporal dimensions of his as-if scenario providing a “model of the minded subject and the prospects of intelligence as time itself.” (13) Chapter five continues by focusing on the ‘discursive apperceptive’ aspects of geistig intelligence, moving from the realm of pure perspectivity to that of objectivity, where thought and beliefs have an epistemic status. (13) In chapters six and seven he homes in on language itself but instead of developing in the wake of a “social-communicative philosophy of rationalism a la Habermas,” (14) he will instead provide an inquiry into language as the dasein of geist of a sociality and syntactic-semantic complexity in a vein that is much closer to theoretical computer science—with its capacity to integrate computation, mathematics, logic, and language.(13) In the final chapter of the book both artificial general intelligence and the functional deprivatized account of the mind are suspended (*aujheben*) in a form of intelligence which is at once “philosophy and a craft of philosophy qua specific program of thinking that has no nature, but only a history: a model for a self-cultivating intelligence.” (14)

This notion of thinking not as having ‘*being*’ or a nature, but rather a history in which its self-reflecting cultivation forms a part of this ongoing history of intelligence and itself opens up a hole in which change, mutation, and transformation is possible as part of a processual movement of temporality in which chance and contingency are once again entertained.

*“Philosophy as the organ of self-cultivation of intelligence is, in the broadest sense, a historical program for investigating the consequences of the possibility of thinking and having mind.” —Reza Negarestani*

## A FUNCTIONALIST AND DEPRIVATIZED ACCOUNT OF MIND

My aim is not to trace the full trajectory of his philosophy of intelligence but rather to expose its outlines in chapter one. He begins with a non-empirical account of critical thinking in which self-consciousness is seen as shaping the form or logical structure of all thoughts. (14) As he puts it: “Whether framed as the program of artificial general intelligence or as a transcendental psychology, the examination of the necessary conditions for having mind marks out a sui generis form of intelligence whose process of maturation coincides with its understanding and elaboration of the link between intelligence and the intelligible.” (15) Over and over again what we read is his erasure of the human, of any sense that what is being discussed his humans in society, but rather of the abstractions of a functional picture of geist that it enables a thoroughgoing analysis of essentially *self-conscious creatures* whose activities are part of an ongoing project in which the end result is to produce a community of such rational agents. He’ll speak of the need for the “desacralization of the mind as something ineffable and given coincides with the project of historical emancipation and the disenchantment of intelligence”(15) as if such a Marxian project were not for humans but for artificial entities who must be freed of

their human entrapments in flesh and affective relations to become pure rational agents of an impersonal realm of machinic systems. As he puts it the object of his project is not human emancipation but “to reorient consciousness and thought toward an emancipatory project, the core of which is the emancipation of cognition itself.” (16)

He will go into a long discussion of Hegel's *aufhebung* (suspension) and his use of it as a ‘self-consummating skepticism’ in which his investigation and critique of the transcendental structure is suggestive of both the operation of Hegelian suspension and the productive incorporation of skepticism into the phenomenology of mind and into the transcendental project which sets out to investigate the functional picture of mind and the figure of the human. (19) As he will say further on,

*For now, it suffices to say that this is a normative ‘rule-governed’ account of function rather than a metaphysical one. The function of mind is structuration: conceptualization, rendering intelligible, making objective. The claim here is that there are no intrinsic functions in nature; all metaphysical functions are in fact modelled on normative activities of the mind. (19)*

This anti-realist and Idealist stance is at the heart of his functionalism: “Mind is not a thing: it is only what it *does*.” (19) Rather than an object to be studied, it is a structuring process that conditions our descriptions.

He spends time explaining the type of functionalism and functional analysis he subscribes to in the book. I'll not go into this aspect of his arguments only to reiterate the basis of his model: “The mind is what it does to the extent that there are adequate material-causal and logical-semantic structures that support its activities.” (20) One of the main contributions to his analysis comes with his incorporation of Hegel's notion of *geist*:

*What makes Hegel's picture of *geist* a significant contribution not only to the history of functionalism and philosophy of mind but also, intriguingly, to the history of artificial general intelligence, is that it presents a social model of general intelligence, one in which sociality is a formal condition for the realization of cognitive abilities that would be unrealizable by individual agents alone. (28)*

Psychologists argue about which human abilities are social and which are emotional. Small wonder: The two domains intermingle, just as the brain's social real estate overlaps with its emotional centers. Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from primal empathy (instantaneously sensing another's inner state) to empathic accuracy (understanding her feelings and thoughts) to social cognition (“getting” complicated social situations). Conventional ideas of social intelligence have too often focused on high-road talents like social knowledge, or the capacity for extracting the rules, protocols, and norms that guide appropriate behavior in a given social setting. Although this cognitive approach has served well in linguistics and in artificial intelligence, it meets its limits when applied to human relationships. It neglects essential noncognitive abilities like primal empathy and synchrony, and it ignores capacities like concern. A purely cognitive perspective slights the essential brain-to-brain social glue that builds the foundation for any interaction. The full spectrum of social intelligence abilities embraces both

high-and low-road aptitudes that have been key to human survival.<sup>2</sup>

Negarestani takes the high-road of cognitive intelligence and leaves the affective aspects of humans completely out of the equation. In fact his functional processes and analysis lead to further artificialization of the mind: “Through the logic of self-relation as the form of self-consciousness, mind attains the ability to treat itself as an artefact of its own concept. It artificializes itself, conceiving itself from the viewpoint of an unrestricted world that belongs to no particular where or when. ...The history of this kind of self—the minding self—is, then, strictly speaking, a project of *artificialization* in the above sense.” (34-35) As he'll say in conclusion to the process of self-relation as self-consciousness:

*Personhood is the product of the impersonality of reason, and consciousness of the individuated self is an artefact of an individuating recognitive space in which all selves are incorporated. In short, there is no consciousness without self-consciousness.*

*Correspondingly, there are no cerebral particular Is without mind as a collective geist. But if the formal sociality of mind is a necessary condition for achieving concrete self-consciousness, it is by no means a sufficient one. Real self-consciousness is a historically and socially mediated process that makes this formal truth a concrete one. The first stage of this process consists in the recognition and augmentation of formal self-consciousness—or reason—whose linguistic and logical space is the infrastructure of cognition. (43-44)*

This movement toward artificiality and artificial general intelligence is to be seen “neither as technoscientific hysteria nor as intellectual hubris; it is an expression of our arrival at a new phase of critical self-consciousness.” (49)

*Hegel is the archenemy of the given, in that he takes the battle against the given from the realm of thought to that of action. —Reza Negarestani*

## THE BATTLE AGAINST THE GIVEN

For most contemporary philosophers, the concept of the given is intimately connected with two philosophical positions: empiricism and epistemological foundationalism. Willfred Sellars in his *The Myth of the Given* widely-rejected the view that sense experience gives us peculiar points of certainty, suitable to serve as foundations for the whole of empirical knowledge and science. The idea that empiricism, particularly in the hands of Locke and Hume, confuses moments of physical or causal impact on the senses with the arrival of individual ‘sense data’ in the mind, was a central criticism of it levelled by the British Idealists, especially Green and Joachim. Negarestani tells us Hegel gives the concept of progress paramount significance in the fight against the given. Geist must go beyond the given and develop its own concept, but only so as to further elaborate the meaning of this move against the given in action by transforming itself according to a concept that negates all particular, manifest, and given contents. (57-58) This rejection of the given leads back to the artificialization of Mind that Negarestani has been slowly arguing for throughout the text:

*Once mind is realized as a configuring factor, the path to a complete functional analysis of the*

*mind is unavoidable; and this path leads to the complete reorganization of mind, its systematic artificialization. Artificiality is the reality of mind. Mind has never had and will never have a given nature. It becomes mind by positing itself as the artefact of its own concept. By realizing itself as the artefact of its own concept, it becomes able to transform itself according to its own necessary concept by first identifying, and then replacing or modifying, its conditions of realization, disabling and enabling constraints. Mind is the craft of applying itself to itself. The history of mind is therefore quite starkly the history of artificialization. Anyone and anything caught up in this history is predisposed to thoroughgoing reconstitution. Every ineffable will be theoretically disenchanting and every sacred will be practically desanctified. (59-60)*

This will lead into his formalization and critique of the human and humanism. For him the human is the “rational self, a discursive apperceptive intelligence, or a sapient creature. Promoting humans as the constituents of mind always risks triggering bad memories of socioculturally charged human exceptionalism, the legacy of conservative humanism.”(65) In other words, conservative humanism and the anthropomorphization of the universe creep in the moment we dismiss the form or the idea of the human—or sapience as a set of positive/enabling constraints for thinking and action—as a token for the labour of intelligibility. (67)

His project seeks to free us of this conservative humanism which has stymied the philosophy of intelligence and sciences. Instead, he seeks a form of sapient awareness that articulates a constructive principle or a form that discontinues the supremacy of humans as a biological species. One that dissolves and assimilates the manifest configuration of the human species—and of any other sentience that falls under it—into the new unities of the impersonal mind.” (67) This de-humanization or de-humanist agenda becomes a part of contemporary posthumanism or in his stance a new inhumanist enlightenment. “By rationally evolving into a self capable of treating itself as an artefact—approaching itself as the artefact of its own Concept—it puts forward a concept of sapient agency amenable to the possibility of realization in other artefacts. Far from being an achieved totality, human sapience is what breaks its attachment with any special status or given meaning. It is an artefact that belongs to the history of mind as the history of artificialization.”(67)

His attack on transhumanist pretensions is equivocal and relentless:

*To be human is the only way out of being human. An alternative exit— either by unbinding sentience from sapience or by circumventing sapience in favour of a direct engagement with the technological artefact—cannot go beyond the human. Rather it leads to a culture of cognitive pettiness and self-deception that is daily fodder for the most parochial and utilitarian political systems that exist on the planet. In delivering sentience from its so-called sapient yoke, one does not become posthuman, or even animal, but falls back on an ideologically charged ‘biological chauvinism’ that sapience ought to overcome, for it is the very idea of humanist conservatism that misrepresents what is accidental and locally contingent as what is necessary and universal. In discarding the human in the hope of an immediate contact with superintelligence or a self-realization of the technological artefact, one either surreptitiously subjects the future to the predetermined goals of conservative humanism, or subscribes to a*

*future that is simply the teleological actualization of final causes and thus a resurrection of the well-worn Aristotelian fusion of reasons and causes. Human sapience is the only project of exit. (69-70)*

As he affirms we cannot bypass the labour of overcoming the quandaries of humanity by positing a dubious metaphysical alternative to the human as a shortcut to freedom. In doing that, we would simply dissolve the problem rather than solving it. In reality, antihumanist alternatives to the idea of the human ironically end up endorsing the most conservative anthropomorphic traits under the guise of some dogmatic figure of alterity. (70) For him humans have past the rubicon of no return, we've entered an era when the manifest image of our folkloric image is now dead, and the new scientific image is becoming more and more outside all humanistic concerns and conceptions: "we have committed ourselves to the impersonal order of reason to which sapience belongs—an order that will expunge our manifest self-portrait.<sup>56</sup> We have crossed the cognitive Rubicon. In committing to this impersonal order we must realize that what is manifestly human—us as we stand here, now—will be overcome by that very order. Reason is a game in which we are all fleeting players and from which we cannot defect, so let us play this game well by committing to its interests and its ramifications. As transitory embodiments of sapience, we can only recognize our mixed animality and the fact that what makes us special is the capacity for such recognition—for recognizing that, as sentients, we are absolutely not exceptional—and take the implications of being sapient to their furthest conclusions. Through the growth and maturation of reason, the definition and significance of the human is freed from any purported substantive essence or fixed nature. The formal appellation of 'humanity' becomes a transferable entitlement, a right that can be granted or acquired regardless of any attachment to a specific natural or artificial structure, heritage, or proclivity, since being human is not merely a right that is simply obtained naturally at birth through biological ancestry or inheritance. The title 'human' can be transferred to anything that can graduate into the domain of judgments, anything that satisfies the criteria of minded and minding agency, be it an animal or a machine. The entwinement of the project of human emancipation—both in the sense of the negative freedom from the limitations established in advance or created by ourselves and the positive freedom to do something or become something else—with the artificial prospects of human intelligence is the logical consequence of the human as a transferable right." (70-71)

This polemic is a manifesto for the artificialization not of humanity and its egoistic dreams as seen in transhumanist conservative enhancement projects across the world, but in the posthumanist inhumanism in which it is sapience itself, intelligence freed to explore and become something other than a slave to conservative agendas that would constrain it and bind it to the human as given rather than a transferable right.

What are we to make of this? Maybe it's best to live the reader with two questions Negarestani raises at the end of the chapter:

*But what kind of life would really satisfy the mind, 'other than one that involves a self-knowledge which has passed through all the stages of disciplined reflection on the source of things', that is to say, their intelligibility? And what is intelligence other than that which knows*

| *what to do with the intelligible, whether pertaining to itself or to the world? (94)*

1. Negarestani, Reza. Intelligence and Spirit. Urbanomic/Sequence Press (November 27, 2018)
2. Goleman, Daniel. Emotional Intelligence, Social Intelligence, and Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence. Harper; American First edition (October 8, 2013)

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